



USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agriculture Information Network

Template Version 2.09

Required Report - public distribution

Date: 6/29/2006

GAIN Report Number: SY6005

Syria

Biotechnology

Agricultural Biotechnology Report

2006

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Report Highlights:

Biotechnology is still a new issue in Syria. Yet to be announced legislation may require seeds be certified non-genetically modified. This issue has not affected the large volume of corn and soybean exports from the United States to Syria in the past and is not expected to do so in the near future.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Annual Report
Damascus [SY1]
[SY]

SECTION I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The biotechnology issue is relatively new in Syria. There is only awareness of the issue. The Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform does not have instructions regarding biotechnology. Importers of sunflower seeds have to present a certificate for sunflower seed imported for crushing. The United States does not export any sunflower seeds to Syria due to the presence of cheaper sources in East Europe. U.S. exports of corn, soybeans, and soybean meal are not affected by any decisions on biosafety. This is expected to continue in the foreseeable future. Imports of vegetable seeds may be required to be non-genetically modified in the future.

SECTION II. BIOTECHNOLOGY TRADE AND PRODUCTION

Syria does not produce any biotechnology products, and none are under development. The major agricultural products exported from the United States to Syria are corn, soybeans, soybean meal and vegetable seeds. Imports of all these products are not required to be accompanied by a certificate indicating that they are produced from non-genetically modified organisms.

This is for two reasons:

1. The lack of suitable laboratories to check for the presence of GMOs in shipments of corn, soybeans, soybean meal, and vegetable seeds. The Central Feed Laboratory of the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform that collects samples and approves introducing feed ingredients to the local market does not have the equipment or the expertise to do such tests.
2. Decision makers at the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform realize that any decision to ban imports of genetically modified feed ingredients that are traded on large scale in the international market will lead to a sharp increase in feed cost, and eventually the cost of all animal products, that the Syrian consumer cannot afford.

Syria imports large quantities of corn, soybeans and soybean meal, mainly from the United States and Argentina. A significant part of these two commodities from both origins is believed to be genetically engineered. Much smaller quantities of corn come from East European sources. Syria is not a food aid recipient or likely to be so in the near future. Syria does not produce any biotechnology crops that were developed outside the United States. Syria does not export any crop or product that is genetically engineered to the United States.

SECTION III. BIOTECHNOLOGY POLICY

The major player is the General Authority for Agricultural Research in the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Environment do not currently have a large role in this field. A biosafety committee has been established. This committee is formed of members from the Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (the General Authority of Agricultural Research), Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Health, and the Atomic Energy Authority.

According to the General Authority for Agricultural Research that submits the recommendations to the higher authorities to make the final decision, genetically modified organisms will not be prohibited from import if they will be used as a feed ingredient or as a raw material for the local

industry. However, some restrictions will be imposed on the imports of any commodity that is going to be imported for planting in Syria. This new policy was expected to be issued in late 2004, but has not yet been announced. The General Authority for Agricultural Research has been asked to provide an update on the situation and whether there are any decisions expected in the foreseeable future, but they have not responded until now.

From best available information, there are no rules in place or proposed on coexistence between biotechnology and non-biotechnology crops.

Syria did not permit imports of processed products in the past. Under the Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement (GAFTA) that went into effect on January 1, 2005, processed foods are permitted to be imported from Arab countries that have ratified the agreement. Import regulations are currently under consideration and most if not all formerly banned food products are expected to be permitted to be imported from all countries. Prevailing labeling instructions do not provide for any requirement to include anything on the label regarding biotechnology.

Syria signed and ratified the Biosafety Protocol in 2004. The Biosafety Committee is responsible for taking any necessary actions to ensure compliance with the protocol. The only impact on trade until now is the condition that imports of sunflower seeds for crushing purposes be accompanied by a certificate that they are not genetically modified.

To date, there are no biotechnology-related trade barriers that hurt U.S. exports. The new legislation, when announced, is not expected to affect bulk commodities exports from the United States to Syria. Economics (and not politics) will be the major force behind continuing with the current policy. Exporters of vegetable seeds may be required to provide a certificate that the seeds are not genetically modified.

SECTION IV. MARKETING ISSUES

The average consumer is not usually concerned about the biotechnology issue since practically all the processed foods in country are either locally produced or smuggled from neighboring countries, mainly Lebanon. The general trend is that if the product is acceptable to be consumed in the country of origin, it should be acceptable to be consumed by the local consumer.

SECTION V. CAPACITY BUILDING AND OUTREACH

Syria is not entitled to make use of any programs such as Emerging Markets, Cochran, or Borlaug.

USDA held a regional seminar on biotechnology in Cairo, Egypt in December 2004. Two senior officials from the General Authority for Agricultural Research attended the seminar for three days. Such seminars are very helpful in allowing Syrian researchers in this critical field to meet their counterparts from other Arab countries and the United States, exchange points of view, adopt science-based strategies, and submit recommendations to the final decision makers that should facilitate the decision making process.